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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BANGKOK 000955

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP, EAP/BCLTV, INR; PACOM FOR FPA HUSO

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TAGS: [PGOV PHUM TH](#)

SUBJECT: CHAT THAI ELECTION PROSPECTS GOOD IN CENTRAL THAILAND

REF: A. BANGKOK 954

[1](#)B. BANGKOK 953

Classified By: Political Counselor Robert Clarke. Reason: 1.5 (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. Chat Thai (CT) almost certainly will win all six parliamentary seat contests in Suphan Buri province in the February 6 election, although CT Leader Banharn Silpa-archa's son faces a formidable Thai Rak Thai (TRT) candidate. The effects of years of Banharn's ability to deliver "pork" is visible in infrastructure projects throughout his home province, and his political influence there, extending to his family and allies, seems almost unchallenged. Chat Thai officials believe that the party's total number of Members of Parliament (MP) from this election could reach 35, a drop from the current level (41). They remain uncertain that PM Thaksin would invite CT to join a coalition if TRT wins enough parliamentary seats for a single-party government. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) On the road from Bangkok to Suphan Buri, car passengers immediately note a physical and audible change as they cross into the Central Region province on which Chat Thai leader Banharn Silpa-archa has lavished his attention for over 30 years. Vehicles glide smoothly and silently along a seamless four-lane highway of a quality probably found nowhere else in Thailand. Visitors soon learn that good roads are only one example of conspicuous infrastructure underlying why Suphan Buri province remains "Banharn country," the political stronghold of the former prime minister. Banharn, his son Varawut, his daughter Kanjan, and several Banharn lieutenants are expected to win all six of the province's parliamentary constituency seats on February 6.

CONSTITUENCY 3 -- CT INCUMBENT CONFIDENT

[1](#)3. (C) Nuttavood Prasertsuvan, a personable two-term Chat Thai MP from Constituency 3, explained to poloff on February 3 why he expects to win again. He said he had tended all year to the needs of his constituents. He lent them money for emergencies, and attended weddings, funerals and other important events in their lives, thereby meeting the most important expectations they had of him. For this campaign he visited every home in the Constituency. He reeled off the statistics: there are 104,410 eligible voters in a population of 138,315 in his area, and all of them would have had some contact with him when they entered the 205 polling stations in Constituency 3 on election day. They would also remember, he said, that he had consistently delivered tangible benefits in the form of markets, buildings, ponds and other infrastructure under the tutelage of Banharn. As a result, within the memory of voters, life had improved and the farmers producing shrimp and rice (mainly for export to Africa and the Middle East) had prospered. Nuttavood commented that he had been a good MP on the House Committee on Consumer Protection, but this achievement was the one his constituents least cared about.

[1](#)4. (SBU) Asked about his opponents, Nuttavood said that Thai Rak Thai (TRT) and the Democrat Party (DP) had both fielded candidates against him. He characterized them as "weak and under-funded," their primary function in the race being to publicize their parties so some Suphan Buri voters might favor them in the "party list" vote. Nuttavood said that TRT and CP had a presence in all six Suphan Buri contests, but Mahachon (MCP) was not running candidates because of an agreement between Banharn and MGen Sanan Khachonprasat, the Mahachon financier and power broker. These veteran politicians had agreed to husband resources and not compete against each other in constituencies where one party or the other looked strong. Nuttavood reported no violence and little vandalism in his local campaign. His main concern was making sure that he did not do anything that might be seen as a violation of the electoral rules and earn him a disqualifying "red card" from the Electoral Commission (EC).

CONSTITUENCY 1 -- THE MALE SCION CHALLENGED

[1](#)5. (U) Poloff visited Varawut Silpa-archa, the only son of Banharn, at the new provincial Chat Thai headquarters set in downtown Suphan Buri (the capital town). Varawut led a tour of the building, which was well-staffed, well-equipped and

had the bustling air of an efficient corporate office. The headquarters has an office and bedroom for Banharn, and two extra bedrooms "for MPs who work so late they have to sleep over." In Varawut's campaign "operations room," he reviewed large maps showing the 197 polling stations and voter lists for the 107,978 eligible voters in Constituency 1.

16. (C) Varawut was energetic and nervous. In his British-accented English (picked up from high school and university years spent in the UK), he explained that, of all six Suphan Buri CT candidates, he was the only one who faced a real challenge. His TRT opponent is Priddee Charoensin, a police officer and former TRT party list MP (who was 74th on TRT's 2001 list, but moved up when higher-ranked allies of PM Thaksin were picked for cabinet positions). Priddee is from a family with long rivalries with the Silpa-archa family. He has strong financial backing from TRT with which, Varawut alleged, Priddee has been attempting to buy votes, a common electoral practice which Varawut said he did not himself use. Varawut said that Priddee was running an active "dirty" campaign and even trying to use Banharn's reputation as a builder against him by telling vendors in markets that Banharn would tear down their area to make way for new construction.

17. (C) In addition to last minute vote buying, Varawut expressed concern that Priddee might bring in military personnel from outside to intimidate voters. This had not happened, but he said his people were alert to the possibility. Varawut claimed that PM Thaksin himself was behind the support for Priddee because of the strong psychological and symbolic blow a defeat of Banharn's son and political heir would deliver to Chat Thai. He said his defeat might be possible, and he would accept it, but in fact he believed that Thaksin had underestimated him as "just another rich kid returning to his father's bailiwick after years of studying abroad." In fact, Varawut said proudly, he is very much his father's son in politics, had worked hard with voters to dispel any playboy image, and expected to "kick ass" on February 6. Ultimately, he said, Suphan Buri voters knew how much his father was still delivering to them with his knowledge of how to maneuver in the government bureaucracies and obtain construction budgets. They appreciated the Silpa-archa family's use of its own money, funneled through a private foundation, to fund public projects and upkeep. Thirty years ago, local people used the river to travel to Bangkok and now dusty roads had been transformed into multi-lane highways, and Suphan Buri had parks, museums, colleges. Varawut said most voters understood that he would carry on his father's tradition. He boasted that, given four more years in office, "no opponent will get a single vote against me."

ELECTORAL CHANCES OUTSIDE SUPHAN BURI

18. (SBU) Asked about Chat Thai's chances for MP seats outside the likely 6 from Suphan Buri province, Varawut commented that the campaigning style elsewhere was different, money was often more important, and it depended on how CT candidates used his father. In An Thong and other nearby Central Region provinces, the appeal of Banharn's reputation was strong and perhaps 10-12 seats would be won. In the North, where there are CT incumbents, as many as 6-8 seats might remain in the party's control. The Northeast might yield 2-3 seats and in Bangkok, if the TRT candidate is disqualified for false educational credentials (which he apparently has been), the CT candidate will win. Combined with party list seats, Chat Thai could have about 35 representatives in the next Parliament, which would be a drop but still a good showing, he said.

19. (SBU) Varawut said that it was unclear whether Thaksin would keep CT in the ruling coalition if TRT won enough seats to form a government on its own. Losing access to the coalition would not matter, he said, because CT would survive as it always has in its long history of going from the opposition to governing, to even being labeled as an "evil" party. He added that CT would never merge its identity into TRT, as other parties had done, even if it were reduced to just him, his father and sister.

ELECTION COMMISSION

10. (SBU) At the Suphan Buri Electoral Commission (EC), two commissioners, the EC director and several staffers were sanguine that the election would go smoothly. They had received only a few complaints and were investigating them. No violence had occurred and the few small cases of vandalism were mostly attributed to unintentional tearing of posters. The EC representatives said they had sponsored a year-long civic education program on voting and hoped to have raised the voter turnout to over 70 percent (as compared to 67 percent in the 2001 national election). They also expected that their efforts would lower the number of spoiled ballots. In 2001, there had been 80 thousand spoiled party list ballots and 40 thousand spoiled constituency ballots.

11. (C) Comment: There is something to the CT candidates' claims that Banharn's role as master builder of Suphan Buri still commands the loyalties of local voters. This does not change the fact that Banharn also has a long record of use of money to bribe officials and further his political career (to the point of being known as "Mr. ATM"). No matter how much he pocketed for himself, Banharn has never forgotten his province. Suphan Buri really is one of the brightest and cleanest, most attractive towns in Thailand. The wide roads have center dividers beautified with flowers and no litter. All the government agency offices are located in one large compound, offering "one stop shopping" probably not found elsewhere. Ordinary citizens with whom poloff spoke all forthrightly expressed support for Banharn and Chat Thai. Several mentioned the parks he had built, including the beautiful one around Suphan Buri Tower, an impressive space needle-like structure, the highest in town, from which one can admire other projects, like the stadium. Poloff also saw hundreds of students enjoying themselves at Banharn's favorite project (which he inspects every Sunday), the Bueng Chawahk Marine Park, a well-stocked aquarium in a public area which also features a vegetable garden, a zoo and crocodile farm, all maintained by the individual government agencies that Banharn ensured would take responsibility for them. All this seems to secure the Chat Thai hold on Suphan Buri, but it is less certain that CT's influence beyond Banharn's home province will survive even as well as in Varawut's circumspect scenario. End Comment.

BOYCE